SPEAK NOW: MEMORIES OF THE CIVIL RIGHTS ERA
RECORDING SESSIONS

Thomas Armstrong

Moderated by LeAnna Welch

Thursday, May 26, 2011

William Winter Archives and History Building

Jackson, Mississippi

MISSISSIPPI DEPARTMENT OF ARCHIVES AND HISTORY
Post Office Box 571
Jackson., Mississippi 39205

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Title: *Speak Now: Memories of the Civil Rights Era* / Memories of Thomas Armstrong, Thursday, May 26, 2011 / moderated by LeAnna Welch

Scope Note: The Mississippi Department of Archives and History in conjunction with the 50th Anniversary of the Freedom Rides and to complement the Department's exhibit *"Freedom Rides: Journey for Change"* conducted recording sessions with local citizens to gather oral memories of the Civil Rights Era. The participants were also given the opportunity to have their photograph taken in front of the exhibit. The recordings were conducted in the spring and summer of 2011 at the William F. Winter Archives and History Building in Jackson, Mississippi.

WELCH: Ok Speak Now Recording number 003. This is LeAnna Welch, with the Mississippi Department of Archives and History. Today's date is Thursday, May 26, 2011. Now sharing his Civil Rights Era memories is Mr. Thomas Armstrong.

ARMSTRONG: Hello. How are you? Ready?

WELCH: Yeah.

ARMSTRONG: Yes, my name is Thomas Armstrong. I am originally from Jeff Davis County, Mississippi, half way between Prentiss and Silver Creek, two small rural towns of Mississippi.

Actually, I got involved in the Civil Rights Movement after I was 13 years of age where I visit a…a Dairy King ice cream shop in Prentiss and just happened to be passing by on the way to school and, walked up to the window and was told to go around to the side to get the ice cream. As I walked around to the side, I noticed there was a sign there, "Colored Only." Next to the window of that particular shop was a 50 gallon drum—a metal drum—filled with garbage with flies swarming all around it. So I immediately left that place. But that's when I began to gain a better and a more overall picture of the situation of blacks in Mississippi during that day, I was 13 at that time.

Later, I went to Tougaloo College, and after the first semester happened to have the opportunity to visit the mass meeting in Jackson at the Pearl Street Church. And just lucky for me that Medgar Evers were moderating that meeting, so, had the opportunity to listen to him explain how in 1955 at least 1,000 blacks were taken from the rolls of Jeff Davis County—voter registration rolls—and he also added some names that were removed. And, here again, coincidentally, I knew some of those names, and some of them were relatives of mine. So at the end of the meeting, Medgar asked for volunteers to help them—help him—perform voter registration in that county. So I felt that I had no choice but to volunteer for that, that's in my second semester of college and I did that for, in—well, I actually did it—in the fall of 1959, 1960, and '61.

After working with Medgar Evers for a while, I joined up with the Freedom Riders. The Freedom Riders, actually, we were following them at Tougaloo as students as when—as they left—Washington, D. C., actually. And, as they came in to Jackson, Mississippi, they were arrested, all thrown into jail. There were a number of students, as I said, were following their progress. And once they were arrested, we were very concerned, in fact, we were concerned the entire trip. But we also concerned once they were arrested because we were not sure that they would get out of jail.

Mississippi at that particular time was known for a lot of violent atrocities and brutality in the prison system. So we decided that, after listening to Ross Barnett the night—I think it was the, the day before—and, listening to Ross Barnett who was the governor state that all blacks in Mississippi were satisfied with their condition there, we decided to—that it was time—for someone in Mississippi to join up, and so that they could not call us outside agitators. So that's what they were calling, along with a lotta other names, the people that was coming in as Freedom Riders. So we joined up my a—one of—my classmates, Mary Harrison-Lee, now—joined the Freedom Riders, and we attempted to leave Jackson on the Trailways bus; however, before we could get on the bus, we met up with the Captain Ray who was the Chief of Police in Jackson. Captain Ray advised us that we were not going any place, so we—but we—informed him that we had tickets and we felt it was within our rights to get on the bus and travel on to New Orleans. He said that didn't matter, so he once again asked us to leave, but we expressed to him, "but we have tickets," [and he said] "so what, you are under arrest." So we were arrested at the Trailways bus station without ever gettin' on the bus.

After that, I was taken to the city jail—Jackson City Jail—and interrogated there and the next day I was taken to the Hinds County Jail and interrogated again, and it was surprising to the investigators—I mean, I'm sorry, yeah the investigators there—and the detectives, and so forth, they could not understand how a black person from Mississippi could get involved with the Freedom Riders, you know, and I get questions like, "Why do you do it? Who told you to do it? Who brought you down here?," you know, "Who paid you?" Didn't anybody pay me. Who—you know—all these type of silly questions, and to aggravate them a little bit, I would always ask them a question as a response, and so, I got pushed around a little bit, but nothing spectacular there. In the jail, especially the Hinds County Jail, we would sing freedom songs at night, and that aggravated them, also. They would threaten to, you know, turn the heat on if it a hot summer day, I was arrested June 23, 1961, so they would say they were going to close the windows and turn the heat on. I mean, all kinds of small threats like that, so the food was terrible, I can say that also.

Surprisingly to me, even though CORE—Congress of Racial Equality, who sponsored the Freedom Rides—had the policy of no—"jail, no bail"—I think I was the fifth or the seventh Freedom Rider to go to trial. In the meantimes, the attorneys—I had several attorneys—Constance Motley of the NAACP, William Kuntzler of the NAACP, R. Jess Brown of Jackson, and two more of Jackson. So, they were trying to figure out how the Freedom Riders should plea. Some of them they had plea nolo contendere, some…actually some guilty, some not guilty. And I, I pled not guilty and I think—oh yeah—prior to my plea, they were getting 200 dollar fines and four months jail sentence, by my pleading not guilty, I received a four

month—I mean a 400 dollar fine and four months. So they were trying to work all this out and it—to alleviate the financial burden on the Civil Rights organization as well as minimize the number of days that you would be confined in jail, ok, so they kind of worked that out and then they—the lawyers—after my case went back to hopefully—I mean—they went back to trying to use the nolo contendere plea for a lot of Freedom Riders after that. So that's, that was my, you know, situation with the jail system. I thought I was gonna be in for the 39 days because the—if you—appeal your sentence, your appeal bond went from 200 dollars up to 1,500 dollars, so that was another reason they didn't want us to appeal too much. So, I wasn't in there—the fourth day I was in there, the president of Tougaloo College, where we—where I—attended, came in and bailed me out of jail. I didn't know at that time why he bailed me out, all I knew was the jailer came, opened the door, and told me to get out and I got out. But, they wanted my case to be a part of a Civil Rights case initiated by Joseph Broadwater who was the head of the NAACP in the state of Mississippi. I didn't know at the time, but that was—there, that's when my—the two attorneys for the NAACP came into my case, Constance Motley and William Kuntzler. So after that particular day, they advised me that they wanted—I had—to stay around either at Tougaloo or at home and be available to them within 12 hours of calling, so—to—participate in any pre-trial motions or, you know, trial proceedings, so, that I did. However, I went back to working with Medgar Evers with the voter registration. Medgar, in my opinion, was the bravest guy in Mississippi at that particular time, everybody just loved him.

[Inaudible interaction between interviewer and participant]

Ok, let me say something else…With the school system, the Freedom Riders, they…actually opened up the State of Mississippi politically, educationally, and socially. So many of the social customs Mississippi had prior to that time—the hundreds of years prior to that time—were disregarded by the Freedom Riders and improved by the Freedom Riders. Politically now, since the Freedom Riders, I understand that Mississippi has more black elected officials than any other state in the union, and that's very good to hear. The educational system—we had a hard time in the educational system—of course Medgar Evers, I believe, was the first gentleman in Mississippi that applied to Ole Miss, and were, were refused. There was a guy from Alcorn—a teacher called Clennon King—he too applied and, if I'm not mistaken I think it was his—what is now—SIU, and, he was—Southern Mississippi, I'm sorry—Southern Mississippi University in Hattiesburg, where is that, and he was rejected, also. And of course Clyde Kennard, okay in Ole Miss, he was rejected. I tried to get into Millsaps; I was rejected. And of course, James Meredith was later accepted at Ole Miss. So we, we kind of opened up that system, you know. So, I think everybody should be very happy that the Freedom Riders came, and that the Civil Rights Movement progressed as much as it did. Thank you.

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